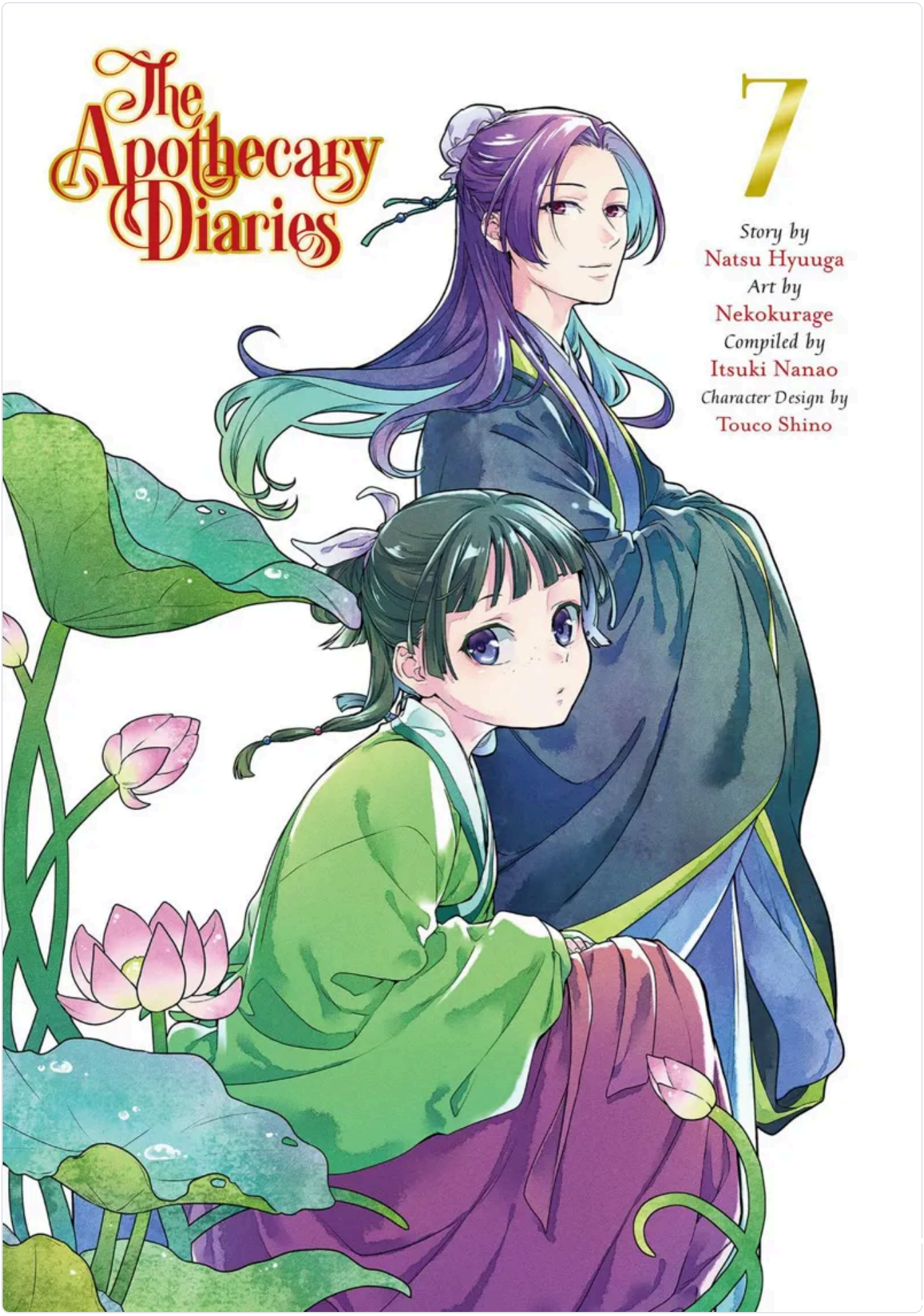
7
Story by
Natsu Hyuuga
Art by
Nekokurage
Compiled by
Itsuki Nanao
Character Design by
Touco Shino
The Apothecary Diaries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I SMELL SANDAL-WOOD.
TWITCH
AS I RECALL, I WAS IN THE THICK OF MY INVESTIGA-TION...
...WHICH LED ME TO BARGE INTO A HOLY RITUAL.
I WONDER HOW MUCH TIME HAS PASSED SINCE THEN.

Chapter 33 Thorn Apple

ズキ THROB
...WHAT AM I DOING HERE?
OH!
I'VE CLEANED IT BEFORE.
THROB ズキ
THIS IS...
...JINSHI'S BED-CHAMBER.
I... AM.
YOU'RE AWAKE AT LAST!
NOW, NOW. YOU MUSTN'T MOVE AROUND TOO MUCH.
YOU'VE GOT 15 STITCHES THERE.
KH!!

THANK YOU.
GO ON. HAVE SOME WATER.
MASTER JINSHI WOULDN'T HEAR OF LEAVING YOU TO REST AT THE PHYSICIAN'S...
...AND BROUGHT YOU HERE.
I'M SORRY TO ASK WHEN YOU'VE ONLY JUST WOKEN UP, BUT WOULD YOU MIND GETTING CHANGED ...?
I'LL BRING EVERYONE TO SEE YOU.
ALL RIGHT.

TCH!
WELL ...
...OUR MASTER NEARLY CAME TO HARM, SO I GET WHY YOU'RE UPSET.
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE PLAYING AT?!
BA SEN!
BUT THAT DOESN'T GIVE YOU ANY RIGHT TO YELL AT ME.
PLEASE FORGIVE MY INSO-LENCE IN STAYING SEATED.
IT'S FINE.
NOW...
...I WANT TO KNOW WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO THE TEMPLE...
...AND HOW YOU WERE SURE THAT THE BEAM WOULD FALL.
I'D LIKE YOU TO EXPLAIN IT TO ME.

YES.
WHAT TOOK PLACE WAS AN ACCIDENT CAUSED BY THE CONVERGENCE OF MULTIPLE COINCIDENCES.
BUT...
...TO MY MIND, THOSE COINCIDENCES WERE MADE TO CONVERGE UPON THE RITUAL ON PURPOSE.
IN THAT SENSE, WHAT OCCURRED WAS NOT AN ACCIDENT, BUT RATHER AN ORCHESTRATED INCIDENT.
THE FIRST OF THESE COINCIDENCES WAS THE DEATH OF A HIGH-RANKING OFFICIAL NAMED KOUNEN LAST YEAR.
!
THE SECOND COINCI-DENCE ...
...WAS A SMALL FIRE BREAKING OUT IN ONE STOREHOUSE AS RITUAL IMPLEMENTS WERE STOLEN FROM ANOTHER.
AND TAKING PLACE AT JUST AROUND THE SAME TIME WAS THE THIRD ...
...IN WHICH THE MINISTER IN CHARGE OF RITUAL IMPLEMENTS WAS INCAPACITATED BY A SEVERE CASE OF FOOD POISONING.

MOST LIKELY.
AND YOU'RE SAYING ALL OF THIS WAS PART OF SOMEONE'S PLOT?
IF THE CULPRIT WANTED TO HARM SOMEONE DURING THE RITUAL AND MAKE IT SEEM LIKE AN ACCI-DENT...
...THEN IT WOULD MAKE SENSE FOR THE THIEVES TO TARGET THESE FIXTURES, WHICH ARE VITAL TO KEEPING THE PILLAR IN PLACE.
THE BEAM ABOVE THE ALTAR...
...IS SUSPENDED BY ROPES ATTACHED TO EITHER END, WHICH RUN THROUGH PULLEYS ON THE CEILING...
...AND ARE ANCHORED TO THE FLOOR BY METAL FITTINGS.
AND SO THEY DID.
IF A THIEF ABSCONDED WITH THOSE, THEY'D OBVIOUSLY HAVE NEW ONES MADE.

ANY ITEMS INVOLVED IN SUCH RITUALS TEND TO BE ELABORATELY ORNAMENTED, RIGHT?
YES, I BELIEVE SO.
IN WHICH CASE, ONE ARTISAN COMES TO MIND.
YOU DON'T MEAN... THAT FAMILY OF METAL-WORKERS ...?!
THE FITTINGS IN QUESTION WOULD HAVE BEEN NEXT TO A BRAZIER...
...TETHERING THE WIRE ROPES TO THE FLOOR.
BUT WHAT IF...
...THOSE FITTINGS HAD BEEN HEATED TO THEIR BREAKING POINT?
DON'T BE DAFT!
WE'RE TALKING METAL HERE. METAL DOESN'T BURN.
AND YET THE BEAM FELL.
I CAN'T IMAGINE SOMETHING LIKE THAT WOULD BREAK SO QUICKLY, HOWEVER HOT IT BECAME.
SURELY THAT MUCH WOULD HAVE BEEN TAKEN INTO CONSID-ERATION WHEN THE ALTAR WAS PUT TOGETHER.

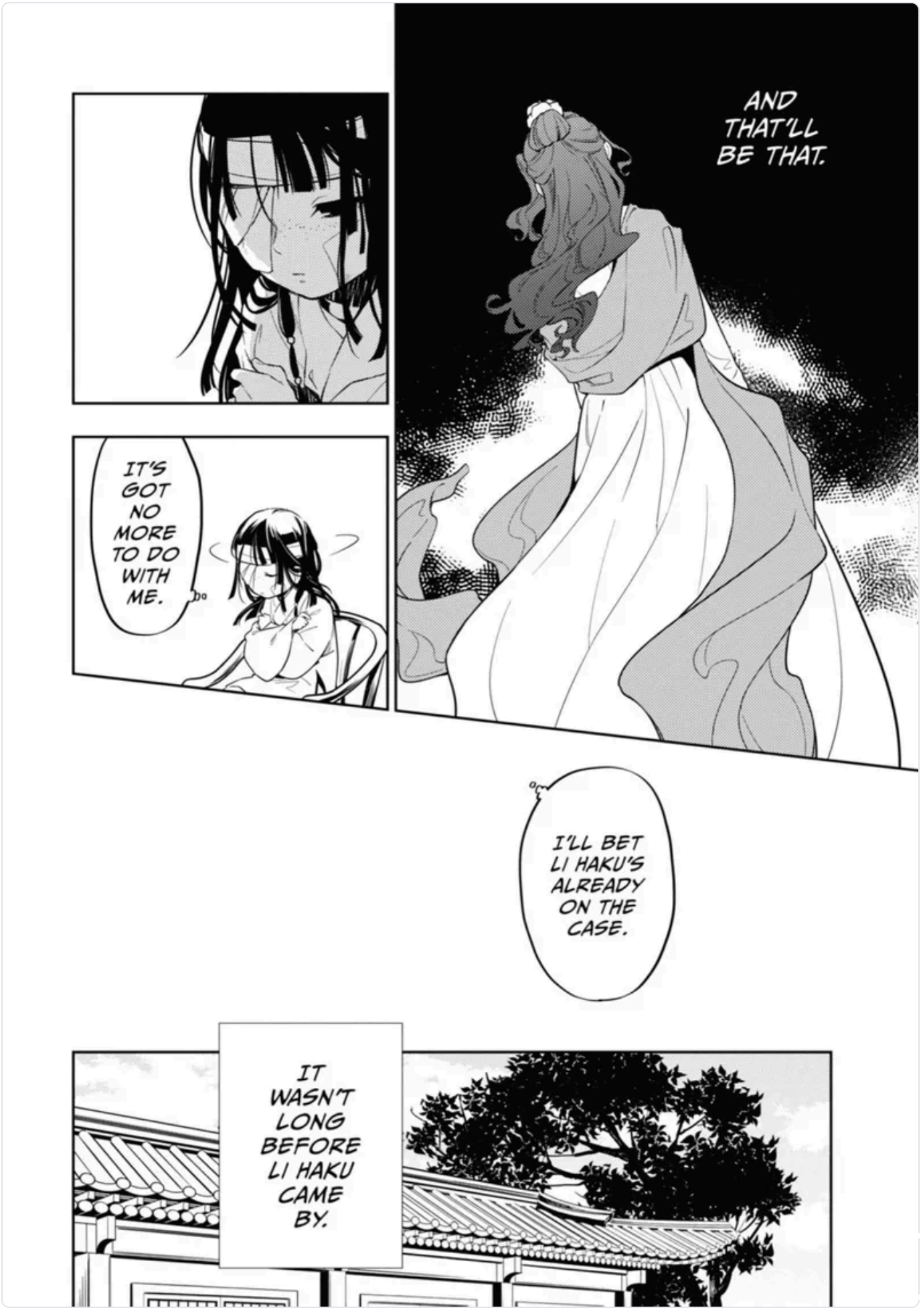
THE PROBLEM LIES NOT WITH THE MAKE OF THE ALTAR...
...BUT...
...RATHER WITH THE CRITICAL METAL FIXTURES, WHICH WERE JUST NOT STRONG ENOUGH.
INDIVIDUAL METALS TYPICALLY ONLY MELT AT HIGH TEMPERATURES.
WHEN MULTIPLE METALS ARE COMBINED, HOWEVER...
...THE TEMPERATURE NEEDED TO MELT THE MIX IS CURIOUSLY LOWER.
EVEN THEN, THE HEAT REQUIRED IS USUALLY STILL CONSIDERABLE.
BUT THESE FITTINGS WERE WROUGHT BY A CRAFTSMAN WHO RECENTLY PASSED...
...USING AN ALLOY OF HIS OWN MAKING, THE RATIO OF METALS IN WHICH WERE KNOWN ONLY TO HIM.
AN ALLOY WITH A UNIQUE CHARACTERISTIC...
...IN THAT...
...IT MELTS AT A MUCH LOWER TEMPERATURE THAN NORMAL.
BY SIMPLY BEING NEAR A HOT BRAZIER, FOR EXAMPLE.

...WASN'T SOMETHING HE PASSED DOWN TO HIS APPRENTICES— HIS SONS.
TO TOP IT ALL OFF, HIS SECRET ART...
THUS...
...THE CAUSE OF THE MELTED FITTINGS WOULD REMAIN A MYSTERY...
...WHICH IN TURN WOULD BE TERRIBLY CONVENIENT FOR THE PERSON PULLING THE STRINGS.
THE CRAFTSMAN DID LEAVE BEHIND CLUES ABOUT IT IN HIS WILL...
GULP!! コクリ...
...BUT IF NO ONE EVER SOLVED HIS PUZZLE...
...THEN HIS RECIPE WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST WITH NONE THE WISER.

BUT HE DID USE LEAD IN HIS WORK-SHOP...
...SO LEAD POISONING MIGHT HAVE BEEN AN UNAVOIDABLE OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD.
OR...
...HIS DEATH COULD HAVE BEEN MADE TO SIMPLY LOOK THAT WAY.
DON'T TELL ME THE LATE CRAFTSMAN HIMSELF WAS MURDERED TOO?
I CAN'T SPEAK TO THAT.
BUT AT THE VERY LEAST...
...WHOEVER COMMISSIONED THE FIXTURES FROM THE LATE CRAFTSMAN...
...MUST HAVE BEEN AWARE OF HIS TECHNIQUE.

AND THAT'S ALL I CAN TELL YOU.
ALL RIGHT, THEN.
WELL ...
...I THINK IT'S REASONABLE TO ASSUME ALL THESE THINGS ARE CONNECTED.
JINSHI WAS THE LAST PERSON I EXPECTED TO SEE BACK THERE.
HAD I NOT PUT THE PIECES TOGETHER, HE MIGHT HAVE DIED ON THE SPOT.
STILL...

WHO EXACTLY IS HE?
IF JINSHI ...
...IS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO MERIT SUCH A GRAND SCHEME TO GET HIM OUT OF THE WAY, THEN...
SHIVER ぞわ
LET'S LEAVE IT AT THAT.
KNOWING THE TRUTH IS TOO MUCH OF A HASSLE.
I'M SURE THEY'LL DISCOVER THE IDENTITIES OF EVERYONE INVOLVED SOON ENOUGH.


AND THAT'LL BE THAT.
IT'S GOT NO MORE TO DO WITH ME.
I'LL BET LI HAKU'S ALREADY ON THE CASE.
IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE LI HAKU CAME BY.

SHE WAS FOUND DEAD.
NO SURPRISE THERE.
...AS A PERSON OF INTEREST IN THE CASE.
WE TRACKED DOWN A COURT LADY NAMED SUIREI...
HUH?!
...SHE WAS LYING THERE DEAD IN HER BED. SHE'D POISONED HERSELF.
ONCE WE'D COLLECTED THE NECESSARY EVIDENCE AND GOT OFFICIALS TO STORM HER QUARTERS...

WHAT'LL HAPPEN TO HER?
I EXPECT HER CORPSE WILL BE PUT INTO A COFFIN AND BURNED ON THE MORROW.
CRIMINALS DON'T GET BURIALS.
THE PHYSICIAN CONFIRMED HER DEATH AFTER EXAMINING THE BODY.
NO.
JUST THE ONE COURT LADY.
WAS ANYONE ELSE INVOLVED?
WELL, AT ANY RATE, THE CASE IS CLOSED!
SEE YA!
I SEE.
DID SHE TRULY CONTRIVE AND CARRY OUT SUCH AN INTRICATE SCHEME ON HER OWN?

IS SHE SIMPLY THE SCAPE-GOAT HERE?
NO, BEFORE I GET TO THAT...
IT JUST DOESN'T ADD UP.
IS THAT REALLY ALL THERE IS TO IT?
DID SUIREI EVEN SEEM LIKE THE TYPE TO SO EASILY TAKE HER OWN LIFE?
I'M TOLD THAT YOU'RE AN APOTH-ECARY.
I'M CURIOUS TO KNOW JUST HOW GOOD OF ONE YOU ARE.
THE WAY SHE SPOKE THAT TIME, AS IF SHE WAS CHALLENGING ME...
AND ABOVE ALL...
WE DIDN'T SPEND MUCH TIME TOGETHER.
THAT APATHETIC FACE, THE OFFHAND MANNER...
BUT...
YOU COULD TAKE THEM TO MEAN SHE DIDN'T HAVE THE WILL TO LIVE.

YOU EXPECT ME TO BELIEVE THAT THE WOMAN WHO UTTERED THOSE WORDS INGESTED POISON AND TOOK HER OWN LIFE?
A MEDICINE TO BRING SOMEONE BACK TO LIFE.
IF THAT'S ALL I'VE GOT TO GO ON, I CAN'T SAY ANYTHING FOR SURE.
BUT A HUNCH WON'T DO.
YES? WHAT IS IT?
OH!
I HAVE A FAVOR TO ASK OF YOU.
SIR JINSHI.

I WISH TO SPEAK TO THE PHYSICIAN WHO PERFORMED THE EXAMINATION ON THE CORPSE OF THE COURT LADY...
...AT THE MORTU-ARY.

I DON'T MIND YOU TALKING TO HIM...
...BUT I'M GOING WITH YOU.
WHAT ?!

AND WHAT BRINGS THAT SMILE TO YOUR FACE?
OH?!

THOSE WHO DIE IN PRISON ARE CREMATED, PER THIS COUNTRY'S CUSTOM.
THE OCCUPIED COFFINS HERE ARE MARKED BY BLACK-AND-WHITE LABELS...
...WHILE THE EMPTY ONES ARE PILED IN A CORNER OF THE ROOM.
WHAT'S THAT?
A HOE.
YES, I CAN SEE THAT...
HERE, HAVE A SEAT, XIAO-MAO.
THANK YOU.
HEY.
I APOLO-GIZE FOR KEEPING YOU WAITING.
22

THE PHYSICIAN WHO WAS BEING FRIENDLY WITH SUIREI!
IT'S HIM!
NOT ONLY HAS HIS ACQUAIN-TANCE DIED, SHE'S BEING TREATED LIKE A CRIMINAL.
OF COURSE HE LOOKS WEARY.
BUT IS THAT THE ONLY REASON?
LET ME GET RIGHT TO IT.
THE POISON THE COURT LADY DRANK...
DID IT CONTAIN THORN APPLE?

...BUT SHE DRANK A CONCOCTION CONTAINING SEVERAL THINGS, SO IDENTIFYING THEM ALL IS RATHER DIFFICULT.
BASED ON THE STATE OF THE BODY, THAT DOES SEEM QUITE LIKELY...
I CAN'T BE CERTAIN.
OF COURSE YOU CAN'T TELL WHAT WENT INTO IT JUST BY LOOKING.
WELL, THAT MUCH IS TRUE.
IF SUIREI HAD SOME ON HAND FROM THE DISPEN-SARY...
...SHE MIGHT HAVE DOSED HER-SELF.
WHILE THORN APPLE IS HIGHLY TOXIC, IT CAN BE USED AS AN ANESTHETIC IN MODERATE QUANTITIES.
AND...
THERE'S A FIELD ON THE SMALL HILL BEHIND THE STABLES, YES?
DO YOU GROW THORN APPLE THERE?
IT MAY NOT BE IN SEASON RIGHT NOW...
...BUT I WOULD IMAGINE YOU HAVE SOME AT THE DISPEN-SARY.

IT WON'T BE FOR A LITTLE WHILE YET...
...THE FLOWERS OF THE THORN APPLE BEAR A STRIKING RESEM-BLANCE...
...TO MORNING GLORIES.
...BUT I'LL BE PLANTING MORNING GLORIES HERE.
NOW, THEN.
LET'S CHECK TO SEE WHETHER OR NOT IT WAS THORN APPLE SHE INGESTED.
HUH ?!
CLATTER カリ
CLATTER カリ
CLATTER ガラ
AND HOW WILL YOU DO THAT ?!

KEEP QUIET AND WATCH!
CLANG
KRIK
GRNCH

CLANG
CLANG
CLANG
GRNCH
GRNCH
GRRK
CREEEEEAK
CRACK
KACLUNK
?!

WHOOSH
THIS CAN'T BE!
SHE'S NOT SUIREI!
WHO'S THAT?!
TREMBLE
SUIREI ...
...WAS MOST CERTAINLY DEAD...
TREMBLE

ARE YOU POSITIVE THAT THE BODY WAS SUIREI?
I WOULD NEVER MISTAKE SUIREI FOR SOMEONE ELSE.
SHE HAD NEITHER A PULSE NOR A HEART-BEAT.
SHE LOOKED SO VERY LOVELY.
YOU HANDLED HER WITH CARE, THEN?
.....
SO MUCH CARE, IN FACT, THAT YOU DIDN'T EVEN THINK TO CUT HER OPEN...
...TO IDENTIFY THE POISON THAT HAD KILLED HER.

SUIREI WAS COUNTING ON THAT.
IN OTHER WORDS ...
...SHE WELL AND TRULY USED YOU.
FLUSH
HOW DARE Y—
WHOOSH
I'M SURE THORN APPLE WAS JUST ONE OF SEVERAL INGREDIENTS IN SUIREI'S POTION.
I'D BE WILLING TO BET THAT A SPOT CHECK OF THE INVENTORY AT THE DISPENSARY ...
...WILL YIELD A FEW DISCREP-ANCIES.
ALL THIS PHYSICIAN CAN BE ACCUSED OF IS THE MISMANAGE-MENT OF HIS SUPPLIES.

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THE TWO DIFFERENT BODIES?
WHETHER OR NOT IT WAS SLATED FOR BURNING, AN EMPTY COFFIN WOULD'VE RAISED SUSPICION.
SO THEY MUST HAVE PREPARED ANOTHER CORPSE TO TAKE HER PLACE.
WHAT BECAME OF THE COURT LADY'S BODY, THEN?
WALKING AWAY WITH A CORPSE WOULD'VE RAISED A FEW EYEBROWS, SURELY.
THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NO NEED.
SHE WOULD'VE WALKED OUT OF HERE BY HERSELF.

THE COFFINS AND BODIES HERE ARE BROUGHT IN BY OTHERS...
...SO THERE'S ALWAYS A CONSTANT STREAM OF ACTIVITY WITH THEIR COMINGS AND GOINGS.
AND SINCE PEOPLE ARE OFTEN QUICK TO AVERT THEIR EYES FROM THOSE WHO ADMINISTER SUCH IMPURE TASKS...
...IT MUST HAVE BEEN EASY FOR HER TO BLEND IN WITH THEM.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
ARE YOU SAYING SHE WASN'T DEAD?
THERE ARE MEDICINES THAT CAN MAKE A PERSON APPEAR DEAD.
KNOW OF ANY?
...I HAVE HEARD TELL OF THEM...
...BUT I WOULDN'T KNOW WHERE TO START TO MAKE ONE.
THAT'S TOO BAD.

SO WHAT OF THEM ...?
I'M NO EXPERT EITHER.
BUT FROM WHAT I'VE HEARD, THERE EXISTS IN A DISTANT LAND...
...A DRUG THAT CAN KILL SOMEONE AND THEN BRING THEM BACK TO LIFE.
IT CONSISTS OF TWO LETHAL POISONS WHICH, WHEN COMBINED IN PRECISE, FIXED AMOUNTS ...
...NEU-TRALIZE EACH OTHER.
A PERSON PRESUMED DEAD COMES BACK TO LIFE AFTER A SHORT TIME.
OBVIOUSLY, PA WOULD NEVER TELL ME ANY OF THIS.
I LEARNED ABOUT IT...
...FROM HIS LIBRARY OF FOREIGN TOMES.
...I'D BEEN SLOWLY DECIPHERING THE TEXTS...
BEFORE PA MADE ME BURN THE LOT OF THEM...
...WITH THE HELP OF THE OCCASIONAL FOREIGN CUSTOMER WHO'D TEACH ME THEIR LANGUAGE.
...I HAVE HEARD THAT THORN APPLE AND BLOWFISH POISON ARE USED TO MAKE IT.
WHILE I'M NOT CLEAR ON THE DETAILS...

GAO SHUN.
WOULD YOU MIND CHECKING THE EMPTY COFFINS?
SHE LAY IN HERE DEAD, WAITING AT LENGTH FOR SOMEONE TO COME TO HER RESCUE.
THERE ARE NAIL HOLES IN THIS ONE.
THIS MUST'VE BEEN THE ONE SUIREI WAS IN, THEN.

...DISGUISED HERSELF IN THE GARB OF ONE OF THE COFFIN BEARERS, AND WALKED RIGHT OUT OF THE MORTUARY.
SHE THEN SWAPPED HER COFFIN WITH THE ONE THEY HAD PRE-PARED...
BY THE TIME HER ACCOMPLICE ARRIVED TO LET HER OUT, SUIREI HAD ALREADY COME BACK TO LIFE.
YOUR MOTIVATION FOR DOING SO WOULD BE A SMIDGE DIFFERENT FROM HERS, I DARESAY.
IF IT WERE ME, I'D GLADLY TAKE THAT BET!
SHE'LL ALMOST CERTAINLY BE PUT TO DEATH ONCE SHE'S FOUND ANYWAY.
IT WAS A RATHER BIG RISK FOR HER TO TAKE, DON'T YOU THINK? THERE WAS NO GUARANTEE THE PLAN WOULD SUCCEED.
AND...
...HAD WE NOT FOUND THIS BODY BEFORE IT WAS BURNED, HER VICTORY WOULD HAVE BEEN COMPLETE.
HER BODY ISN'T HERE.
SO SHE WON THAT WAGER.

BUT ALAS, IT'S NOT TO BE!
I WON'T LET YOU WIN SO EASILY!
LEER
BUT NOT TO CATCH HER.
SHE HAD THE WITS TO PASS OFF ALL THOSE INCIDENTS AS ACCI-DENTS...
...AND THE NERVE TO ACTUALLY PULL IT OFF.
AND MOST OF ALL...
HEH HEH HEH...
IF SHE'S ALIVE AND WELL, I'D LOVE TO MEET HER.

...TO DECEIVE EVERY-ONE.
...SHE HAD THE RESOLVE TO GO SO FAR AS TO PUT HER OWN LIFE ON THE LINE...
HOW DULL IT WOULD BE TO SEE SOMEONE LIKE HER KICK THE BUCKET TOO SOON!
BUT I JUST CAN'T CONTROL THESE FEELINGS WELLING UP INSIDE ME!
IT'S UTTERLY IMPROPER TO FEEL THIS WAY BEFORE THE DEAD.
HA HA!

HAAAA!
HA!
HA!
HA!
HA!
AN ELIXIR TO REVIVE THE DEAD!
HA!
HA!
I MUST HAVE HER TEACH ME HOW TO MAKE IT!!
ピ
FREEZE
ﾀｯ
39

ゼクッ
JUMP
PAR-DON ME, SIR.
FWIP
COULD I TROUBLE YOU TO STITCH UP MY LEG?
I SEEM TO HAVE REOPENED MY WOUND.
じ
SEEP
わっ
WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SOME-THING SOONER ?!